

2009

# Fountains

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School of the Arts  
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***FOUNTAINS***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May 2009

## Table of Contents

	Page
Title .....	i
List of Figures .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
Chapter	
1 Nature and artifact.....	1
Hair project .....	3
Shrine cabinet .....	6
Altar cabinet.....	9
Cicada's shell .....	11
2 Fountains .....	13
Baby bottle fountain.....	13
Sheds fountain.....	15
Screen fountain .....	15
Missile fountain .....	18
Babbling .....	22
Circulations.....	24
Resume .....	25

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: <i>Semiautomatic Broom</i> .....	4
Figure 2: <i>Ghosts</i> .....	6
Figure 3: <i>Shrine Cabinet</i> .....	8
Figure 4: detail from <i>Altar Cabinet</i> .....	9
Figure 5: <i>Altar Cabinet</i> .....	10
Figure 6: <i>Cicada's Shell</i> .....	12
Figure 7: <i>Baby Bottle Fountain</i> .....	14
Figure 8: <i>Screen Fountain</i> .....	17
Figure 9: detail from <i>Screen Fountain</i> .....	18
Figure 10: <i>Missile Fountain</i> .....	21
Figure 11: <i>Babbling</i> .....	23

## **Abstract**

### ***Fountains***

By Toshiyuki Tanaka, Master of Fine Arts

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Fine Arts at  
Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Jack Wax

Professor of Craft/Material Studies, School of the Arts

Most of my works are figurative and depend on my memory when I was modeling. I'd like to attempt to clarify the memories through process of modeling. When I model a human, it might not be a perfect imitation of body because it's a representation of

memories, and it's affected by memories. It is not important to imitate the human form, but I'm interested in gathering memories and giving a form to them.

I'm interested in life force and transience of life, so I was looking for a material which can represent these qualities. When I am engaged glass, I am interested in movement of melted glass and transparency of it. When it is melting, it seems to have a life, but when it is still, it seems to be dead. I am fascinated with qualities of material which have transience. It is an existence of life for me.

In *fountain* series, I attempt to use liquid as a material. Unlike solid material, water, oil, and foam don't have a stable form. However, I consider that water flow and its liquidity are available as a type of kinetic sculpture. The liquid is supposed to be a material for sculpture. Like melted glass, liquid flowing seems have a life. I recognized that there is a possibility to use liquid as a material throughout the series. Their subtle motion can represent transient vital force.

## **Nature and Artifact**

I use matter directly to create much like an aboriginal man or a child. I remember a vivid impression from childhood when I made a creature from clay. It was a pleasure to create life through materials. Although it did not have a life force, it still seemed alive. When I was a student at Tokyo Zokei University in Japan, I continued to model creatures and facsimiles of human bodies in clay. At the time, I realized that the form has to embody the detail contained within. The placement of wrinkles should relate to the movement within the skeletal structure that causes them, because the jawbone's movement is responsible for a very particular set of creases of the skin. Unless I modeled with a relationship between the inside and the outside of it in mind, the form did not have a life force.

As a student at the university in Japan, I enjoyed working with materials such as stone, wood, and metal, but I became biased against these materials because of the associations I had with them often overpowered the work. An object made from stone can rarely escape being understood in the context of the stone as material. For example, many copies of Greek sculptures are made from a plastic resin that looks like marble, because

sculptures made from marble still have the meaning that it is “fancy”. A material has a meaning that depends on its appearance, it identifies itself.

Metal, stone, and wood are materials which have a certain perpetuity. Even with temples made of wood, the construction can be durable for over a thousand years. In architecture, sculpture has been considered a durable artifact through the use of permanent materials. One shrine in Japan, Ise shrine has been rebuilt every twenty years for hundreds of years. One of the oldest Buddhist temples in Japan is Horyuji, whose foundation is made of wood and stone. Using stone makes the construction durable. Horyuji has excellent weather durability. This technology was imported from China. In contrast to Horyuji, Ise shrine is only made of plain wood, so the structure decays easy. Therefore, Ise shrine has to rebuilt every twenty years, before it decays entirely. This is a practical reason why the structure has to be rebuilt. Another reason is that rebuilding holds meaning as an education for the carpenter who is charged with the reconstruction. The technique has been transmitted from generation to generation through the rebuilding. This construction also signifies transmigration and reincarnation of the soul.

When I am working with glass, I consider its various appearances. Glass seems to have a life force when it is in its melted state. Once I was engaged in glasswork, I became fascinated with the qualities of this material: its mutability, transience, and fragility. Glass represents life for me; I sympathize with its changing of phenomenological state and its sense of pathos.



When I was in a sculpture class in Japan, its foundation was modeling an imitation of physical beauty. I was educated to model in traditional ways. As a result I could grasp how the human's body and animal's bodies are constructed. I recognized that there is hardly a person alive who has the inherent physical beauty that is found in Greek sculpture. Most people's physical beauty is acquired. Some people modify their body artificially through cosmetic surgery or through body-building. I recognized that the artificial body could be included in the sphere of natural beauty although it is an imitation of nature.

There is a boundary between nature and artifact, but this boundary is vague and variable. We are used to living in artificial environments, rather than in untouched nature. A garden represents an environment which is an artificial space that uses natural stones and flora. A gardener harmonizes nature and artifact in a garden. When a gardener constructs a garden, They borrow proper proportions of an arrangement of flora and stones from a natural landscape. For gardeners in Japan, considering a landscaped garden can take into account surrounding landscape. They adopt flora into the space of the garden, and at the same time they also adopt the appearance of the garden to its surrounding environment.

### **Hair projects**

In the *semiautomatic broom* (see, fig.1), I installed an electric motor that generated vibrations in a broom's head. These vibrations generate a driving force that was out of control. When I was a child, I made a prototype of *the semiautomatic broom* with toothbrushes and a dc-motor. My use of motion is an attempt to imbue the substance with a

life force. These experiments change our experience and our interpretation of mundane objects. The hair in *the semiautomatic broom* piece represents the life of a creature through motion. Hair is a substitute for the body. In the past, a deceased person left his/her hair to the family after he/she died. Therefore, hair is evidence that someone had existed before they passed away. It is a trace of life.



(fig.1) *Semiautomatic Broom*, Broom, AC motor, 2007

Another way to think about what represents a trace of life is to consider a digital image, which is a ghost of a living person because it can appear everywhere through the Internet and through mobile devices. Today, people can hardly prove their existence or identity without some form of identification. Therefore, there might be have some points of similarity with the image of a ghost. We no longer rely on just our bodies to establish our identities, but rather we rely on digital and virtual images. This digital/virtual information continues to exist, disembodied in time, even when the person physically disappears. We can never touch a ghost's body because he/she does not have a tangible body. We can only recognize his/her existence through visual images. Therefore, a ghost exists only in our memory. Today, we also exist in a virtual world that has a digital memory. It is similar to a ghost's existence.

The pieces in the *ghost* (see, fig.2) are inspired by representations of ghosts within Japanese art, literature and movies, such as scenes from the film "The Ring" 1998 by Nakata and Suzuki. I consider these images of ghosts as representation of sadness, mystery and the unknown. When a ghost appears in these films and stories, he/she conveys the message that he/she wants to rest in peace.

In the *ghost*, my goal was to represent the fragility of human beings who exist everywhere but nobody knows who they are through the use of transparent glass and artificial hair. The forms that I employed for this body of work are also representative of water; as some ghost stories relate to water in their traditional narrative structure. In a maid story in a Kabuki play in 1916, a ghost appeared from a well and Sadako or Samara also

crawled up from an old well in the Ring. They had a rebirth from the bottom of the well. I believe that just as water circulates in the biosphere, life forces may be reincarnated. I am interested in forms that communicate this fluidity and the metaphors that might be applied for vestiges of life.



(fig. 2) *Ghosts*, glass, artificial hair, 2008

### **Shrine Cabinet**

When I came to the U.S, I noticed that there was a medicine cabinet in the bathroom of almost every home and in hotels. I recognized the similarity between medicine cabinets and home shrines in Shinto religion because people face the medicine cabinet's mirror

every morning and night. It seems people are praying at the shrine. In the traditional home in Japan, there is a home shrine in their living room or kitchen. Some home shrines have a circular mirror on the altar. I attempted to combine the form of the home shrine and role of medicine cabinet into *shrine cabinet*. Having a bath, washing your face, brushing your teeth, and taking a pill are daily practices for almost people. Those practices might be insignificant but it is important to not only keep a healthy body but also a wholesome mind through out life. The daily practices might be the ritual in the bathroom which is a holy place for suburbia. This work is a hybrid between the home shrine and medicine cabinet.

(fig. 3)





(fig. 3) *Shrine Cabinet*, mirror glass, 2008

### **Altar cabinet**

In *Altar cabinet*, The shape is that of an altar of Buddhist designs (see, fig 4). This work has a device from portable refrigerator which generates condensation on the surface of mirror. It seems as if some one breathes out toward the mirror although there is nobody in the small altar (see, fig 5).



(fig. 5) detail from *Altar Cabinet*, 2008





(fig. 4) *Altar Cabinet*, sheet glass, a component of peltier, 2008



### **Cicada's shell**

When I was eight years old, I was engaged in collecting cicada shells. There was a grove behind a library near my house. I went to the grove to pick the shell every morning during summer break. One early morning, I found a cicada nymph on a tree and I watched the cicada nymph emergence. It had metamorphosed to an imago over several hours. I don't know why I was so much more enthusiastic about collecting the cast off shell than about bug hunting. I only remember that scene of the cicada's emergence.

When the locust nymph becomes an adult, it leaves a remnant of its development as a cast off shell. Human beings never leave cast off skin, so we can hardly see our development stages. Compared with insect's life, we develop and grow slowly and apparently seamlessly.

As a regular kid, I had collected cicada shells but I didn't understand why I had been so obsessed with collecting the shells. I was interested in bugs and small animals, and why they can move and live although their bodies are appeared to be tiny and fragile. I sometimes dissected the body of a bug or a frog for the sake of my curiosity. I wondered where the life comes from and where it goes? I was a merciless kid when I was playing with small lives. As a result, I buried a lot of their bodies in my back yard, and I learned so much from the structure of their bodies, but I realized that I could never create life itself. I have been attracted to the life force, and to make the work that concerns the life force. (fig.

6)



(fig.6) *Cicada's Shell*, blown glass, 2008

## **Fountains**

### **Baby bottle fountain**

I sometimes get an idea from an everyday object. For example, I was used to giving my son milk when he was an infant. One day, I prepared to give him milk; I poured hot water into the baby bottle, then I put the bottle in cold water. As a result, the bottle suddenly spouted out milk from the nipple. I got the concept of *the baby bottle fountain* from this event. This work focuses on form along with the physical phenomena of motion. Through fountain the series, I am attempting to use an element of nature; embodied in a liquid, such as water. I juxtaposed artificial shapes with temporal phenomenon. *The baby bottle fountain* spouts out white liquid (see, fig 7). Hopefully this movement signifies the spring of life.



(fig. 7) *Baby bottle Fountain*, baby bottle, pump, plywood, resin, pigment, 2007

### **Sheds fountain**

*The sheds fountain* is an architectural maquette that incorporates a pump to power the circulations of water. It works to facilitate communication between one shed and another shed through water exchange. It seems to communicate as a personified house. The circulation also works to signify the communication with another world, such as a role of reincarnation.

### **Screen fountain**

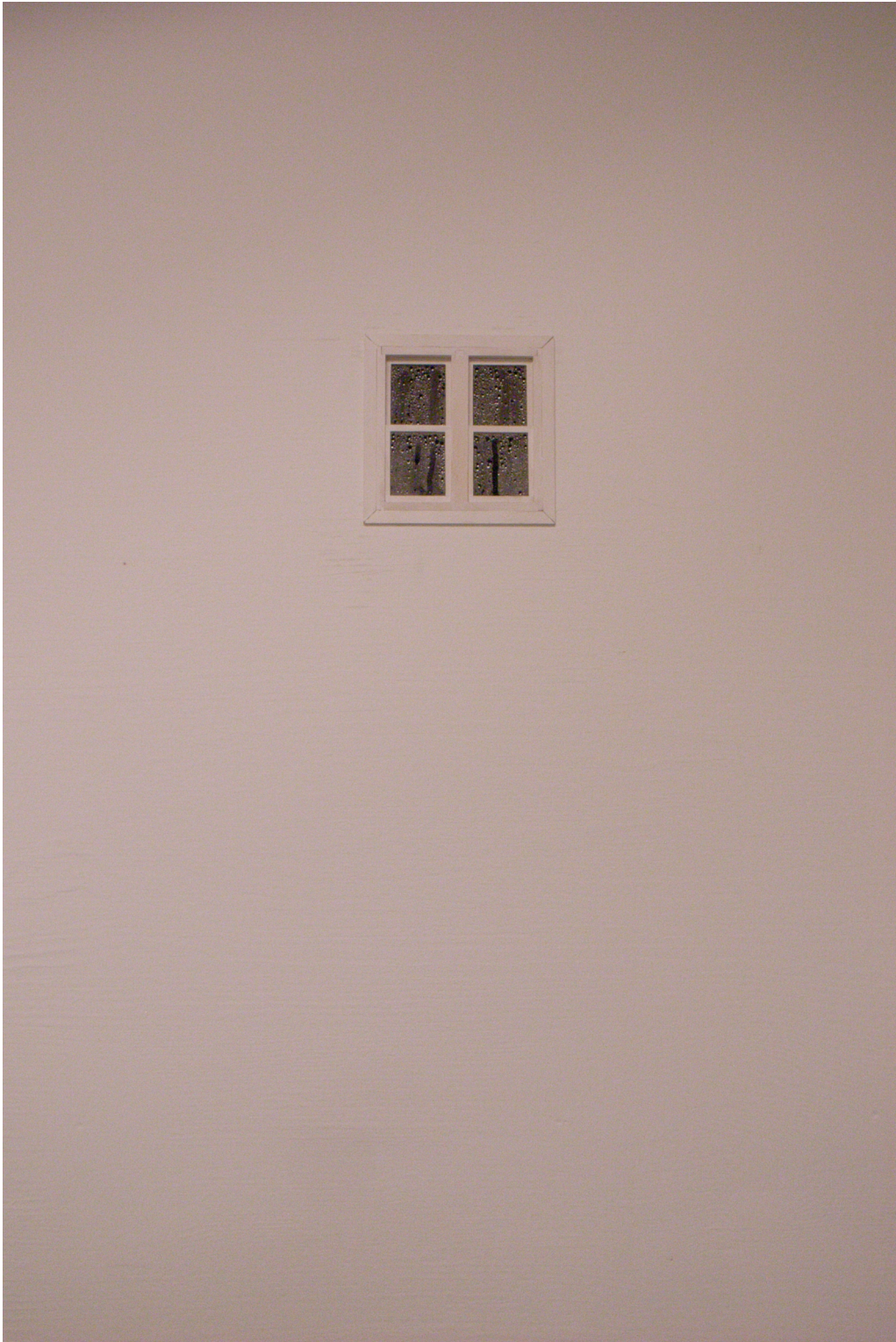
One midsummer night, I couldn't get to sleep for a long while because of sweltering heat. I decided that if I spent the night to listening to music I could the fall asleep. I don't remember how much time went by when I suddenly realized that I was cold. I turned the music off and I looked out of the window to find it was raining.

This small and insignificant scene from my life is what I hope to represent through this piece. I have in the past investigated physical phenomena and motion by using simple electric devices. In the fountain series, *baby bottle fountain* (2007) and *sheds fountain* (2008), I installed pumps to generate circulation and a stream of water. In this work, I also installed a pump. The use of motion is an attempt to represent a scene from life. I hope that it evokes a slice of memory for viewers who have had different life experiences.

When we watch a motion picture at a theater, we watch a movie which belongs to visual illusion. At the same time we can be said to be watching a darkness which exists between one frame and another. A roll of film is formed of a large amount of frames.

There are dark moments between each frames. We see the darkness unconsciously, as when we are blinking. I suppose we see the darkness almost half of our lifetimes, which includes sleeping and blinking. Not only when watching movies, but at other times we quite often watch rectangular screens. Playing videogames, writing e-mails, sending text messages, taking photos, we have gotten used to watching the screen. There is no darkness when we watch an LCD screen (such as a computer). We are obsessed with watching rectangular screens. In *screen fountain* (fig.8), I attempt to use the phenomenon that a water pump can sprinkle water behind a miniature window. It seems as if rainfall is in the darkness through the window (see, fig.9). This work is not a virtual digital reality, it is rather lo-fi reality seen as it is through tangible window.





(fig.8) *Screen Fountain*, wood, acrylic sheet, pump, water, 2009



(fig. 9) detail from *Screen Fountain*, 2009

### **Missile Fountain**

When I think back to my past works, I found that they were mostly figuratively based. Figurative work represents not only the reality of natural forms but it also reflects the historical and culturally associative meanings of form. Figurative forms contain plural meanings, and sometimes it is fuzzier than language, but it can (and often does) transcend cultures.

In folk religions, the culture and the religion often integrate messages of objects used daily with the larger meaning of the events of the day. These objects are worshipped,



housed in altars, in shrines, and in holy places. There is a wide diversity of altar forms and icons through out the world. I don't want to imitate natural or existing forms, but I am instead attempting to fabricate form as an image, which connects a variety of things into one thing. It is supposed to be a work of hybridization to work as a hybridizer.

Weapons can embody masculine power. Many children are fascinated and fetishize weapons as toys, (in video games, movies, and cartoons). They get used to the overwhelming excitement of using weapons without any hesitation. It can lead them to believe in the power of weapons. They become believers underlining current phallicism of weapons. In the industrialized world, weapons are displayed in homes and museums. They often embody masculine powers, and engage the public with ideas of mass destruction and genocide. Some religions have a history of displaying phallic forms in shrines and on sacred grounds. In the Kanayama shrine, in Kawasaki, Japan, people pray to a phallus for easy delivery, a safe birth, a good marriage, and the couple harmony. In this case, the phallic form represents a vital force, rather than a symbol of destruction. We tend to consider primitive cultures as barbaric and savage, however, displaying weapons is more barbaric than displaying phallic forms in public.

In Hinduism, the *linga* is a representation of the phallus and the *yoni* is the symbol of the female sex organ. The yoni often forms the base of linga. Male and female principles together represent the totality of existence and the generative and regenerative power of life and the gods. I am attempting to apply the role of *linga* into the fountain pieces that I

have been working on. I replace the *linga* with what I consider to be a more contemporary representation.

I didn't realize where the idea of *the missile fountain* came from in my work, and how primitive religious icons had affected my modeling. A professor told me there was a resemblance between *the missile fountain* and the *linga* of India. After that conversation with him, I realized that I had seen the *linga* in India when I was ten-year-old boy. I might have fabricated the fountain as *linga* unconsciously.

The *missile fountain* is a hybrid: somewhere between a tomahawk missile and a *linga* (see, fig. 10). Originally, the *linga* symbolized a phallic form. I used the form of the missile, from the perspective of the modern individual, (who tends to interpret phallicism as obscene and rude.) I'd like to reconsider what a barbaric manner is. Displaying weapons is a type of destructive power worship, and it is a form of modern phallicism. It should be considered as barbaric and primitive, perhaps more than anything else.



(fig. 10) *Missile Fountain*, foam polystyrene, urethane resin, wood, pump, oil, 2009

## **Babbling**

An image of an explosion, a mushroom cloud is a symbolic destruction embodied. Information-oriented societies are flooded with the image of the mushroom cloud, through movies, TV, and inter-net. Many viewers are fascinated with images of explosions. After the Industrial Revolution, missiles, bombs, and guns have been seen as codifying barbaric masculine power. Some primitive and natural religions display penis forms in shrines and people wishing to pray happy family life. The phallic form represents vital force rather than symbol of destruction.

Liquid doesn't have a regular shape. It runs to the lowest level of ground. A bubble can't keep its shape for a long time. It is short-lived. In *babbling* (fig. 11), a new bubble is born, yet in a moment the bubble disappears. But a mass of foam can keep a shape through the use of an air pump (which generates form constantly). I attempted to represent a life force in this work. Using unstable materials such as foam it might be seen as the metabolism of a life. The sound of bubbles bursting is subtle, but it is a bit like mumbling, or a baby's babbling. A bubble will bust, but the foam keeps the same shape through re-generation. It's just like that people die, but the human race lives on.





(fig. 11) *Babbling*, blown glass, wood, air pump, synthetic detergent, 2009

## **Circulations**

When I was ten years old, my mother took me to India. It was first significant experience of a different culture. This experience has influenced my work unconsciously. I now recognize the similarity of the folk cultures of India and Japan. It might be the role of polytheism. I remember that many people took baths in the Ganges river. I saw cremations near the river. They burnt the body to ashes. Their life deeply connected with the river. There are life and death at the same time by the river. People are born, and they all die someday. This cycle must repeat, again and again. It's an eternal cycle. It's like a river which flows a vehicle of life and death. The river flows continually, constantly, and seamlessly. It's supposed to be linear and relay new life to the next generation. One reason why I exist is I'm a part of the relay. In spite of my father's death, my son was born. This cycle might be cruel, but at the same time it might be graceful. This is not individual issue. It's a matter of due course, but it's often hard to see from the perspective of individualism. That is why I have been fascinated with fountains which re-circulate liquid continuously, as a relay of this life force.

Currently, my work focuses on form along with a myriad of physical phenomena, activated by motion. Through the fountain series, I attempted to use an element of nature, which is a liquid such as water. In this final series of works: I have overlaid artificiality with the study of nature and I have tried to reconcile the irreconcilable factors with the works.

## RESUME

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#### Education

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- 1994 BFA sculpture, Tokyo Zokei University, Tokyo, Japan
- 1994 – 96 Toyama City Institute of Glass Art, Toyama, Japan study in glass working

#### Group exhibitions

- 2009 *Brend*, F.A.B. gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2005 *Thailand and Japan Sculpture Symposium in Chiang Mai*, Chiang Mai University  
Chiang Mai, Thailand
- 2004 *Craft exhibition at Takashimaya*, Takashimaya Yokohama, Japan
- 2003 *Suimon*, Hitoki Futaki, Kanagawa, Japan
- 2000 *Gara Gara Punch*, Jizaikuukan Ichie, Kanagawa, Japan
- 1998 *Kuru Kuru Guru Guru*, Rofuto, Kanagawa, Japan  
*Giyamanism #1*, EPO Hall, Odawara, Kanagawa, Japan
- 1997 *Giyamanism #2*, EPO Hall, Odawara, Kanagawa, Japan
- 1996 *Drops*, Nihonbashi Tomy Gallery,  
Azabu Kougeikan, Tokyo
- 1994 *Mame fu*, Nihonbashi Tomy Gallery, Tokyo

#### Solo exhibitions

- 2008 *Fountains*, Plant Zero, Richmond, VA
- 2004 *Hollow solidity*, Savoir Vivre, Tokyo
- 2000 Aobadai Maruzen, Yokohama, Japan

#### Teaching

- 2004 - Lecturer in sculpture, Tokoha Gakuen University, Shizuoka, Japan
- 1996 - 05 Instructor in glass working, Minamiashigara city Recycle Center, Kanagawa,  
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